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ABSTRACT

The traditional system of letter grades discourages college-bound students from taking difficult courses. Many colleges look closely at an applicant's grade point average (GPA). When a student's GPA is computed, a grade from an easy course carries as much weight as a grade from a difficult course. Since a student can achieve a higher grade with less effort in an easy course, there is a temptation to avoid more challenging classes which could adversely affect a student's GPA. Another drawback to traditional letter grades is their lack of accuracy in reflecting a student's performance. When only five grades are used, the range of performance within each grade is necessarily large. The alternative to this system is a weighted grading system using point values instead of letter grades. Under such a system, more points would be achievable in a difficult class than in an easy class. To implement such a change would not be easy, but it is worth a try. (DC)

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Gregg W. Downey

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Bright idea: Hard courses should carry more weight than easy courses

THE WAY MANY schools report student achievement is inaccurate and unfair. The traditional reporting method—assigning grades of A, B, C, D, and F to student work—discourages college-bound students from electing to take classes that require rigorous effort. (We need a weighted grading system, which I'll describe in a minute.) I believe the current reporting method should be changed, and it seems to me that school executives are in the best position to spearhead this reform.

I make my recommendation as a high school student and school board member: As a high school senior who hopes to attend college this fall, I see the damaging effects of—and hear students complain about—the current grading system daily. And as student member of the Los Angeles Board of Education, I'm aware of the complaints made by many college officials that today's college freshman often arrives at the university with an academic background skewed heavily toward nonchallenging basic courses and irrelevant electives. In light of current grading practices and college admissions policies, a student aspiring to college might be foolish to sign up for a demanding high school courseload.

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A major culprit in this unhappy situation is the grade point average (G.P.A.). In many schools, the G.P.A. works this way: A student receives four points for a grade of A, three for a B, two for a C, and one for a D. No points are given for an F. Student grades are averaged each semester, giving the student a cumulative G.P.A. The problem: This system of grading doesn't make a distinction between students who take difficult, advanced academic subjects and those who fill their transcripts with less-challenging classes. Because many universities look closely at a student's G.P.A. (and other things, such as standardized test scores) in their admissions process, students are tempted to pass up challenging college-preparation classes in favor of "gut" classes that might yield a higher mark and a higher G.P.A.

Consider the hypothetical case of students Smith and Jones. Both college-bound students earned good grades in their schools' required courses—mostly A's and B's. Student Smith in his senior year takes a number of advanced science and mathematics courses, including calculus and physics. These classes are challenging and demand a great deal of time and effort. Student Jones, on the other hand, elects to take business mathematics; physics is passed over for the less-rigorous ecology science. Student Smith receives a share of B's for his hard work, but Student Jones pulls down straight A's without special effort. Result: Student Smith's G.P.A. suffers, and Student Jones's G.P.A. soars.

Many students are aware of this anomaly, and most who want to attend college realize that a good G.P.A. is one giant leap toward gaining admission to the college of their choice. So the pressure is on: Many students select courses with an eye toward jacking up their G.P.A.s. When they reach college, they have good grades, but not the best of academic backgrounds.

It also seems ridiculous that five classifications of letter grades accurately can describe the range of student performance. A grade of C might indicate a semester score of from 78 to 85 points, but in many schools a student with a 78 and one with an 85 both receive the same letter grade. This isn't fair, and most teachers know it. As one student recently told me, "I can go to my teachers and almost always justify a B."

To help cut down on students filling their class schedules with the academic equivalents of hollow calories, I propose a new, comprehensive marking system that accounts for the varying degree of difficulty among courses and that reflects a more accurate accounting of student performance:

Under this plan, all courses in high school are evaluated and assigned a maximum point value. This number indicates the *most* points a student can earn in a course. Most courses, including required courses, might have point values of 100 or so. Less demanding courses, however, might carry a maximum point value of 85, and the academically challenging electives might carry point values of 115 or even 120. A student who earns a grade of A in business English, then, might receive an 85; a student who earns a grade of C in the more rigorous advanced-placement English class also might receive 85 points. This kind of grading plan has two effects: First, students who want to take easier courses still can do so, and students who are interested in more challenging academic work can take advanced courses without fear of lowering their G.P.A.s. Second, student achievement can be measured and recorded with more precision than a five-level, letter-grade system allows.

I realize that adopting comprehensive grade reform will pose problems for administrators and provoke some criticism. Before you could present such a plan to the board, you would need broad-based participation by teachers, parents, fellow administrators, *and* stu-

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dents; these people would need to examine the course content, the degree of difficulty, and the outside-class work requirement of every course offered by your high schools. Teachers also would have to learn to write accurate course descriptions and learn to use the new marking system. College and university placement offices would have to adjust to seeing student achievement reported in a new way, and parents and students would have to plan carefully the best program of a student's academic work. None of this would be easy. But such a plan might well allow students the opportunity to take academic risks without fear of sabotaging their G.P.A.S. Isn't it worth a try? ■